Church/Early stand taken in support of Darwinism

From NEWS1

our church.' "

The church's identity is grounded in congregationalism, which values social action and higher education. Congregationalists were early advocates of abolition and women's suffrage. The church founded Harvard University and several liberal arts colleges, including Colorado College. The first president of the college also was the first pastor at First Congregational. The church still has strong ties to the college.

In the early years, the congregation met in an apartment building, an opera house and courthouse. It didn't take long for congregationalists to cause a stir. During an 1877 state convention in Colorado Springs, a minister read from a paper, "Darwinism: Not Necessarily Opposed to the Bible." As a result, the convention voted on a resolution supporting Darwinism.

The local congregation built its permanent home at the corner of Tejon and St. Vrain streets in 1888-89. The church's stone exterior draws amateur photographers; its tent-shaped tin roof evokes a giant Hershey's kiss. A stone fireplace lends a homey feel to the sanctuary.

The place has long been a center for ecumenism. The church has loaned its worship space to a Korean church and a Jewish synagogue, among others.

"That follows in the good congregationalist tradition of churches being a melting pot for the entire community," said the Rev. Dave Hunting of Community Congregational Church in Manitou Springs.

In 1957, congregationalists and three other faith traditions joined under the banner of the United Church of Christ, whose motto is "that they may all be one."

The 1950s also brought a First Congregational Church campaign against a local group that singled out suspected communists. The church was a stage for debates on civil rights in the 1960s. White said some members left the church because it welcomed blacks.

Perhaps no issue has split First Congregational Church like the debate over homosexuality and faith. The issue arose in the early 1990s as the city and then the state weighed proposed laws covering legal protections for gays and lesbians.

A divided church membership voted in 1997 to allow same-sex holy union ceremonies in the church. Several families left the church as a result. Some members say anger stemmed more from procedural matters leading to the decision than the essence of the stand.

"I don't think it should have gone to a vote," said Elin Ashenhurst, 82, a member for the past decade. "I think in a way the church hasn't recovered from it."

Since the vote, one holy union — between two men in 1998 — has been held at the church.

"There were people who said, 'We'll be known as the gay church,' or 'We'll become a marriage mill for queers,' " White said. "Nah. It didn't happen."

The vote did crystallize an effort to oust White. A consultant brought in to lure back the departed members came up with a list of 16 things "wrong" with the church, White said. Fourteen had to do with him.

Ironically, gay rights is not one of White's causes. He feels most strongly about cross-generational religious education, and peace and justice issues.

The holy-union vote set the stage for another vote in January 1999. The church decided to become "open and affirming" to gay, lesbian and bisexual people. That means they're welcome to become members and hold leadership positions.

"I think it was a vote on whether the love of Jesus Christ is really available to all people or not," White said. "I think the church's soul was being held up for trial."

Despite the defections, membership has grown from 450 to 650 in the past decade. White said many new members are friends or relatives of gays and lesbians.

The church today is 95 percent white, a mix of ages and well-educated, White said. The church counts many teachers and psychologists as members and few military and business people, he said.

Recently, members have become more interested in deepening their spirituality. On Thursdays, a canvas labyrinth is spread on a floor for people who find inner peace walking it.

That spiritual emphasis will likely grow as the church looks to the future, White said. He also said it's likely the church will focus more heavily on peace and justice issues, continuing its rich activist tradition.

Eric Gorski covers religion and nonprofit groups and may be reached at 636-0304 or gorski@gazette.com

schools at anywhere near an average level, may I point out that national test scores, while not as high as would be nice, are generally over the average? And with this minimal funding the system manages to provide social workers, psychologists, special transportation and full-time one-on-one aides for children who cannot be in a traditional classroom. Can you imagine what would happen if people truly supported the public education system? District 11, in which I have two children, also provides some of the top honors opportunities in the entire state, with the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program at Palmer and the IB Middle Years Program at North and Palmer (both programs accredited by the international organization), and SAIL courses in Irving and West middle schools and Stratton Elementary.

The other complaint I hear a lot of is that the last round of money was wasted. Don't you remember the leaking roofs at Wasson and other schools, or the state-of-the-art-1930s heating system at North? The money went right where it was supposed to, into building repairs, new schools, computers in every class and training for the teachers. Come and see the improvements before you complain And you don't have to wear your coat or carry an umbrella on your tour.

No system is perfect, and as a volunteer

bond to be paid off over decades.

This is an off-year election and turnout will be low, but public employees and others who expect to make money off of your taxes will be voting in large numbers. So get out to vote this year and call their bluff. Just vote no on all issues.

— John K. Berntson
Chair
Libertarian Party of El Paso County
Colorado Springs

THIS IS IN response to the commentary by Paul Gilbert regarding 2A and the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo ("Should we tax ourselves for the zoo?" The Gazette, Oct. 20). Taxes are seldom fair. Gilbert's argument is that the tax proposed on 2A will be forced on everyone. Of course it will, but to say the tax is unfair to "people already struggling to earn a living" is a statement without basis. I am struggling to earn a living, but I will scarcely miss the penny taxed on a $20 purchase. And honestly, how many people really think about those pennies? Look in the parking lot of any store and you are

THE LEAGUE OF Women Voters of the Pikes Peak Region supports the continuing development of a comprehensive system of public and private transportation. We support equality of opportunity through access to education, employment and housing, thus promoting self-sufficiency for individuals and families. Therefore, the league supports the El Paso County Metro and Rural Transit Access Authority measures 1A, 1B, and 1C on the Nov. 2 ballot.

The population of our region has grown rapidly but our transit service has remained constant. The proposed transit system would allow students, senior citizens, and the handicapped greater access to our expanding community. Great communities strive for great accessibility. The League of Women Voters Believes that in order to promote a healthy and prosperous economic climate in our communtiy, we need to support 1A, 1B, and 1C. Vote yes.

— Frances Ledwig
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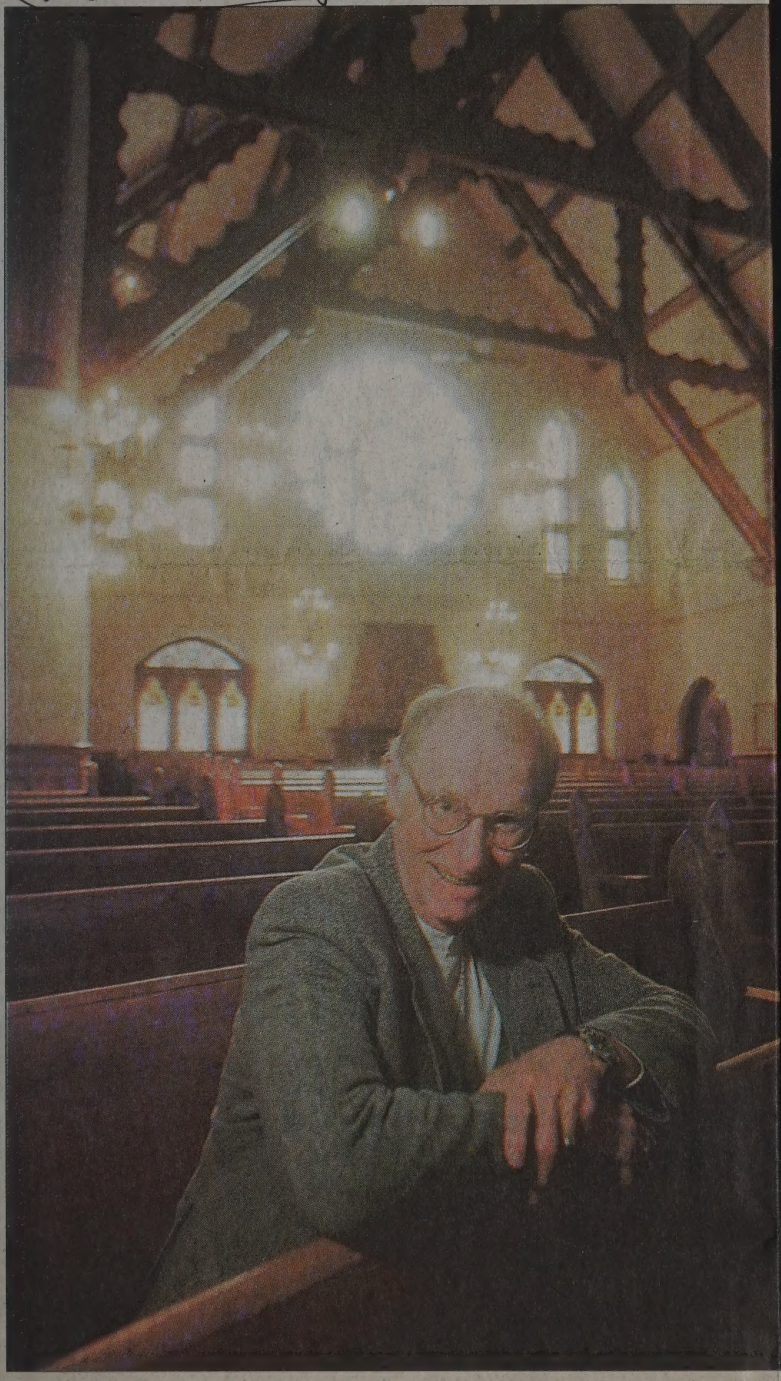
A rich tradition

Gayette Telegraph / Saturday Oct 23, 1999

Photos by Mark R



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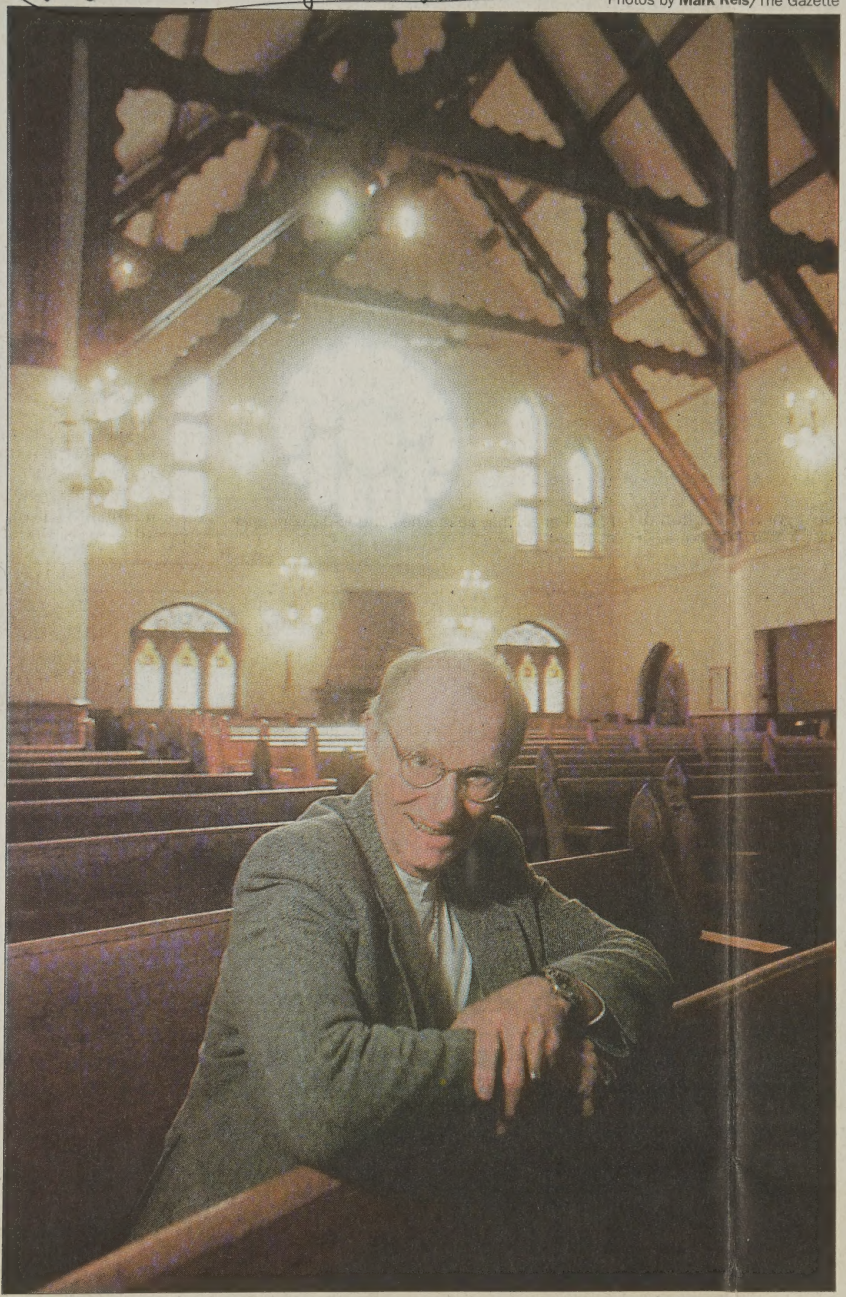
A rich tradition of social activism

Gazette Telegraph / Saturday Oct 23, 1999

Photos by **Mark Reis**/The Gazette



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A brick placed in the cornerstone of First Congregational in October 1888 was removed last month to reveal a time capsule containing 19th-century items from the church and Colorado Springs.

First Congregational Church celebrates 125th anniversary

By **Eric Gorski**/The Gazette
Story editor Mike Braham
Headline by Jeanne Davant

Throughout its 125-year history, First Congregational Church has been positioned solidly to the left when it comes to Christian theology and social activism.

The church fought McCarthyism in the 1950s, rallied for civil rights in the 1960s and welcomed gays and lesbians in the 1990s. Yes, that was senior minister Jim White picketing at the downtown post office during the Persian Gulf War.

The provocative stands at times have led to divisiveness within the church, particularly in the past decade under White. Still, membership is climbing.

As a two-month-long 125th anniversary celebration comes to a close this weekend, the church remains a stronghold of liberal Christianity in a city known for staking out the other side of the ideological spectrum.

"If it weren't for this church, I guess I wouldn't belong to any church," said Bob Murray, a retired lawyer and a church member since 1952. "I believe in the lifelong search for truth. Every other church I'm aware of is doctrinaire — 'If you don't believe this, you can't belong to

See **CHURCH**/NEWS3

IF YOU GO

First Congregational Church wraps up two months of 125th anniversary events this weekend. Here's the schedule:

TODAY

10 a.m. — A presentation at the church, "Our Puritan Parents — Anything to Retain or Forget from Them?" by George Drake, a former Colorado College dean and church member. With responses from Joe Pickle, Bob Howard, Robert Loevy and Jim White.

1 p.m. — Historic walking tour of the church building at the northwest corner of Tejon and St. Vrain streets. Led by Jim White.

6 p.m. — Banquet at Colorado College's Palmer Hall. Tickets for the event are sold out.

SUNDAY

8:30 and 10:30 a.m. — Worship services. George Drake preaching. Mary Hawkes of Carthage, N.Y., will present a new hymn to mark the anniversary.

TO FIND OUT MORE about the history and beliefs of the United Church of Christ, visit the denomination's Web page at www.ucc.org.

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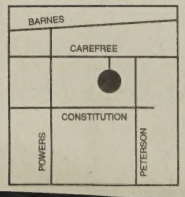
October 23-24

Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Sunday 12 noon to 6 p.m.

- Bring the kids for a **FREE** pumpkin from our pumpkin patch
- **FREE** glo-stick bracelets (Children 12 years old and under)
- "Wanda Witchie" a magical celebration with Tricks and Treats for the whole family, 1 - 4 p.m. both
- Radio remotes by KCCY (Saturday) and KVUU (Sunday)
- **FREE** child safety seat inspection clinic by DRIVE SMART Colorado, 10 a.m. - 12 p.m. Saturda
- Tour our model home complex

It's a Halloween thing!